

Reforming Baptism: A Call to Return the Normal New Testament Way of Committing to Jesus

by Steven Steinhaus

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‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...’ (Mat 28:19)

Introduction

The global church today urgently needs to rethink the doctrine and practice of baptism. Our modern, entrenched theologies have led many of us to positions on baptism that I believe are neither truly biblical nor very helpful, yet we hold to them tenaciously. Even among evangelicals, some preach ‘baptismal regeneration’ while others push for ‘immediate baptism as in Acts’. Even more cling assiduously to the concept of ‘faith alone’ thereby relegating baptism to the realm of optional activities or worse, to ‘works’. All claim Scripture as the basis for their views. However, I would argue that each lacks the ability to acceptably handle all the New Testament material: ‘baptismal regeneration’ leads to confusion on the New Testament’s clear teaching of salvation by faith alone; ‘immediate baptism’ tends to truncate normal and biblical processes leading up to intelligent commitment, especially in household or group evangelism; delay of baptism (catechism) compromises the clear and urgent appeals of Scripture to ‘believe and be baptized’ (Acts 2:38, etc.); and infant baptism, built on a covenantal view of salvation, appears to make logical sense but lacks even a single New Testament example.³ All viewpoints struggle with certain verses that just don’t seem to fit. Consequently, the average believer ends up lost in an array of heated debate and circuitous theological discourse that slows his disposition to obey Christ’s commands and can ultimately lead to a pick-and-choose

³ The purpose of this paper is not to discuss and explain the theological bases for the various views on baptism, all of which ‘make sense’ to their own constituencies. Instead we will look again at what the Bible actually says about baptism and examine the actual cases of how it was practiced in the New Testament. Thus, while not trying to offend anyone, I am aware that much of what I have written in this paper will be offensive to nearly all theological camps and traditions. While this is regretful, it should be noted that even my own traditions have not withstood this same scrutiny.

approach towards discipleship. Worse yet, today in the West, millions of *un*believers have been baptized and assured of their salvation while in the East missionaries and mission churches continue to perpetuate these same imported patterns leading to a new multitude of baptized ‘believers’ who are even more ignorant due to their non-Christian backgrounds.

Due to such problematic practices with baptism in the mission fields of Indochina, a Korean missionary recently issued ‘An Urgent Plea for Disciplinistic Baptism in the Buddhist Context’ in the *Evangelical Mission Quarterly (EMQ)*. His article forms an impassioned attempt to remind the world that immediate baptism of minimally informed Buddhist converts can actually be counterproductive to the process of discipleship (Kim, 2013). In my own context of ministry in Indonesia, some advocates of a version of T4T Church Planting Movement (CPM) methodology (Smith, 2011) argue for immediate baptism of Muslim individuals who profess faith even if only after a private, short gospel presentation. To argue their case, they use ‘The Acts Hammer’ - a list of passages in Acts where immediate baptism is given to people who respond after apparently only hearing a short gospel presentation (including Saul, Cornelius, the Ethiopian eunuch, the Philippian jailer, etc.). To them, these passages constitute evidence that we need to do baptism the same way in Muslim contexts today.

Examples from the mission field and longstanding theological debates provide ample evidence that the issues surrounding baptism are not merely academic. Our views and models of baptism impact our view of salvation (soteriology), policies regarding church membership (ecclesiology), and our models of mission, evangelism and discipleship (missiology and practical theology). Baptism, therefore, turns out to literally be a watershed issue impacting fundamentals of the Christian life. Is it possible that an objective, non-denominational reconsideration of the New Testament data on baptism might lead us to some key ideas and concepts we’ve been overlooking?

The lost key: What baptism meant and *how* it was performed in the New Testament

To a modern evangelical who is well acquainted with the New Testament, no matter where one falls on the positions noted above, there remain many verses about baptism that are quite difficult to understand. All evangelicals hold to salvation by faith *alone* through the grace of God (*sola fide*). Consequently, if we *require* baptism *for* salvation, most would consider this a contradiction of *sola fide*. If we see the ritual of baptism as *effecting* salvation, then we lapse into ‘sacramentalism’ (viewing the sacrament as salvific, not faith). However, certain verses pose serious problems to our evangelical view. In the sections below, I list many such verses, with some comments on them. Note the italicized words in particular:

- 1 Peter 3:21 states, ‘and this water symbolizes *baptism that now saves you...*’ Is this teaching sacramentalism?
- In Acts 2:38 - ‘repent *and be baptized...*for the forgiveness of your sins’. Is Peter requiring baptism for forgiveness?
- In Acts 8:36-38 Why was there such urgency for baptism instead of a simple profession of faith or prayer of repentance? How did the eunuch even know about baptism?
- In Acts 10:43-47 Peter tells Cornelius’ household to ‘believe’, and immediately *orders* them to be *baptized*.
- Acts 9:18; 22:16 In neither case is there any mention of Paul’s repentance or faith, yet he was baptized.
- Paul himself, the New Testament author who seemed most concerned about articulating salvation by faith alone, pens many similarly perplexing verses about baptism:
- Galatians 3:26-27 states, ‘You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you *who were baptized* into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ’. Are we clothed with Christ through faith or baptism?
- Romans 6:3-4 challenges readers: ‘Or don’t you know that all of us who were *baptized* into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him *through baptism* into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.’ Paul seems to be linking *baptism*, not faith, as the way into new life and the resurrection.
- Colossians 2:11-12 echoes Romans 6:3-5, also appearing to point to baptism as the way that believers put off the sinful nature and are raised with Christ: ‘In him, you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in *baptism* and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.’
- Throughout Paul’s writings, the idea of *unbaptized believers* seems totally alien to his thinking. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 Paul assumes everyone in the church at Corinth had been baptized and had received the Spirit. In fact, these realities were what Paul was appealing to as a basis for unity. Ephesians 4:3-5 and 1 Corinthians 1:13 continue this same theme, both of which speak of ‘one *baptism*’ into Christ which unifies the church. Yet *unbaptized* believers are common in the Church around the globe today.

The Apostles John and Mark, as well as the author of Hebrews, also make similar statements on baptism, which give us pause.

- John's Gospel records Jesus' emphatic statement that 'No one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is *born of water* and the Spirit' (John 3:5). Though many attempts have been made to understand the water as something other than baptism (see for example Carson 1991, 191-196), the early church saw it differently. In fact, John 3:5 had already become a common baptismal text by the 2nd century (Ferguson 2009, 369), correlating nicely to Titus 3:5 which emphasizes both water and Spirit.
- Mark 16:16 states, 'whoever believes *and is baptized* will be saved'. Most scholars believe the whole section of Mark 16:9-20 is a second century addition not attributable to Mark himself. Nevertheless, even if it is not original, we can discern the early Christian thinking that linked *salvation with baptism*, similar to what we've seen in other canonical passages above.
- In Hebrews 10:19-22 the author implores readers to draw near to God with full assurance 'having our hearts *sprinkled* to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our *bodies washed with pure water*.' Surely the reference to having our 'bodies washed' is about baptism. In fact, Beasley-Murray says this verse is probably the most affirming of a 'sacramental view' of baptism in the whole New Testament. (Beasley-Murray, 265)

From the above compilation of verses, the similarities seem striking and perplexing. Does the New Testament teach sacramentalism and baptismal regeneration? Does it encourage us to baptize people who are inadequately prepared? I believe not. But I also believe our common understandings are mistaken as well. Instead, in order to resolve all of these problems we need to recover an insight lost to most of the contemporary church.

The 'key' is that baptism is *not* a ritual that imparts eternal life (contra sacramentalism and baptismal regeneration) *nor* is it to be administered *after* one commits to Christ (contra the dominant view of many evangelicals), *nor* is it just an optional ritual in addition to 'praying to receive Christ' (contra the attitude of many in the parachurch). It is also *not* to be administered to people who have no understanding (contra paedobaptists) nor little understanding (contra many evangelicals and especially many cross-cultural evangelists) of what the Gospel is or who Jesus is. Instead, in the New Testament the act of baptism was given to new believers *at the point of* an informed commitment to Christ. That is, the way people expressed their faith in Christ initially in the New Testament was *by being baptized*. They did not pray a 'sinner's prayer' or 'go forward'; they went through the ritual of baptism, a powerful symbol which was an 'acted-out-prayer'.

Notice the precision with which I. Howard Marshall comments on 1 Peter 3:21. He explains that much of the confusion we face about baptism stems from the fact that when the New Testament writers pen phrases such as 'baptism

saves you' it is 'simply shorthand for conversion' (Marshall 2011, 131). Marshall continues:

God saves you in and through the act of baptism, which is the outward expression of the twin facts that he regenerates you by his Spirit on the basis of the atonement wrought by Christ and that you come committing yourself in faith and repentance to Christ as your Savior... Baptism saves you not by any virtue in itself but by the effects of Jesus' resurrection... although baptism is the normal means of Christian initiation, salvation is not the result of merely submitting outwardly to baptism.' (131-132)

Scholarly agreement on baptism as the NORMAL New Testament way to commit to Jesus

I. Howard Marshall's analysis above corroborates the opinion of the vast majority of leading scholars. Though many practitioners may have not realized it, the scholars' collective opinion on this issue is overwhelming: in the early church people *became Christians* through baptism. Here are just a few of these scholarly voices. George Beasley-Murray writes, 'Baptism is the vehicle of yielding to Jesus Christ', and 'the occasion when a person is met by Jesus Christ' (1962, 95). Writing as an English Baptist, Beasley-Murray was fully aware that what he wrote was not in line with the common practice of his day: altar calls complete with calling people to 'pray to receive Christ.' A more recent and truly encyclopedic volume on baptism was penned in 2009 by Everett Ferguson of Abilene Christian University. He echoes Beasley-Murray stating: '[Baptism] is the occasion of divine activity in bringing the benefits of the death of Christ to the believer' (2009, 165). Robert Banks writes, '[Baptism] is not an outward representation of an already concluded inner decision. It was by the means of baptism the individual or family actually committed themselves to God' (1994, 78). Arthur Patzia states, 'Most commentators see Acts 2:38 as the most normative statement of Christian initiation in the New Testament. Baptism was seen as a unity event – faith-baptism-Holy Spirit – rather than a sequence of three separate experiences' (2001, 236-238).

Michael Green writes, 'Conversion, baptism and the new life, at least as far as adults were concerned, were inseparable' (ibid, 156). Similarly, George Patterson writes:

The invitation of the apostles, for example, was not to raise one's hand or to 'come forward.' They simply told those who trusted in Jesus to show their repentance by being baptized (Acts 2:38; 22:12-16). Any decision-making ritual that man has devised to replace baptism as the instrument to confirm salvation has had a much poorer record for determining who are sincere. Baptism is the decision-making ritual.' (2008, 40)

Finally, Wayne Meeks points out the uniqueness of the form and function of Christian baptism:

By making the cleansing rite alone bear the whole function of initiation, and by making initiation the decisive point of entry into an exclusive community, the Christian groups started something new. For them the bath [baptism] becomes a permanent threshold between the 'clean group' and the 'dirty world.' (2011, 153)

The ramifications of this profound 'lost key' are many. What would it take to reinstate baptism as the culmination of our evangelism? What would we need to do differently? How would we need to disciple people differently? What impact might it have? Here are a few of the possible ramifications we might encounter if this ancient practice were once again applied in our ministries.

1. It would give us a powerful teaching device, which, as the ritual of baptism is carried out, would instruct both the person being baptized and the congregation witnessing it. This then would demonstrate and remind everyone of what our salvation means, while also simultaneously clearly marking the point of entry into the Kingdom and the Body. (This would tend to eliminate statements such as the oft-heard: 'I prayed to receive Christ many times but I'm not sure when I really became a Christian.' And, 'I became a Christian years ago, but I've never been baptized.')⁴

2. It would help prevent us from baptizing those who lack credible evidence of making a well-informed decision. This could be done like the Bereans who 'examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true' (Acts 17:11) through a group process of pre-baptismal teaching *before* commitment. Examples from the New Testament could be studied in order to show that those baptized were fully cognizant of the decision they were making, that is nothing less than a life-long commitment to Christ and his Body.⁴

3. It would help prevent us from viewing the act/ritual/metaphor of baptism as salvific in and of itself, for baptism would come as it was in the New Testament *after teaching* in which we would clearly affirm that it is *by faith* that one comes to Christ (Rom 3:28; 4:5; 5:1; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8 etc.), and *by faith* that a person gives himself/herself to baptism as an expression of faith-commitment (Acts 8:12; 16:31-34; 18:8; Gal 3:26-27; Eph 4:3-5; Col 2:11-12 etc.). Such teaching would bring a person to the place of commitment through the proper symbol (baptism) at the proper time (when sufficiently understood and clearly ready to commit).

⁴ In the Appendix we discuss one way of doing this through 'Discovery Groups'. This is one way being used very effectively around the world to lead individuals and groups to an intelligent decision for Christ before baptism.

4. It would help us settle the question of infant baptism, for infants clearly cannot understand what is happening to them during their infancy, nor would they be unable to undergo the whole acted-out metaphor of immersion.

5. It would improve Church unity, for it would clearly delineate who has credibly professed Christ and who is still seeking. (This is especially important in areas of persecution.)

6. It would strengthen perseverance, since those who submit to baptism would be well ‘vetted’, discipled and already have believing friends, family and mentors.

How this truth has been hidden from us

In light of such clarity from such a diverse body of reputable scholars, coupled with so many potential benefits, how is it that this ‘lost key’ has evaded so many in contemporary evangelicalism for so long? Here are several possibilities:

1. *It goes against our evangelical traditions.* If this understanding of New Testament baptism is correct, it runs counter to numerous evangelical traditions. I know of no evangelical group that tells people to delay ‘making a decision’ or ‘being saved’ until the point of baptism (except for what’s happening in some CPMs in Asia and Africa).⁵ In contemporary evangelicalism, the practice of urging people to repent and believe in Jesus has become divorced from the New Testament *way* in which they did so – through baptism. Do we cling to our views not based on fair-minded exegesis but out of allegiance to religious-cultural traditions and sentiments?

2. *It seems counter to lessons from our history.* Another reason modern evangelicals have missed the biblical teaching on baptism may stem from overzealous application of lessons from our history. Initially, an over-reaction to Roman Catholicism at the time of the Reformation made nearly everything seemingly Catholic to be anathema to most Protestants. Later, during the early 20th century, revivalist preaching flourished in our nation’s history, bringing unparalleled successes that many seek to imitate. Yet we apply methods from one era and location to our peril if we don’t remember their contexts. At the time of the Great Awakenings in England and America nearly everyone professed ‘Christianity’ and most had already undergone a ritual ‘baptism’ as infants. Therefore what was deemed necessary was not a conversion to *Christianity* but a personal commitment to knowing Christ *personally* through repentance and new birth. Consequently, the tactic of the great revivalist preachers like Finney and Moody was to encourage individuals to ‘make a

⁵ Of course, only God himself knows when a person is actually converted and saved.

decision' to follow Christ, without regard to family considerations, periods of pre-baptismal instruction or the practice of (believer's) baptism.

Though this did lead to many professions for Christ, we are now unfortunately left with a lot of 'evangelical baggage' (Smith, 2010) including a lack of commitment to discipleship and misunderstanding of baptism.⁶ Today, having built entire theologies and ministries on revivalist concepts, we're unable to see the idea that *salvation by faith was initially expressed in baptism in the New Testament*. Consequently, we either disregard the idea altogether or end up in theological confusion. In the words of Scot McKnight, revivalism has led us to a truncated Gospel focused on making *decisions* instead of making *disciples* (McKnight 18, 2011). McKnight further contends that instead of truly being 'evangelical' we are now simply 'soterian' (focused on getting people saved) resulting in a 'massive, nominal, non-disciple Christianity' instead of a life of 'intelligent discipleship' (ibid, 15). Are we brave enough to actually change the way we ask people to commit to Christ?

3. *Most Westerners are incredibly individualistic*. Perhaps another reason that many have missed the Bible's teaching on baptism (as the *entry point* of commitment to Jesus), is because of the Western focus on the individual and the need for a 'personal' decision. In national values surveys, America is consistently ranked as *the most individualistic nation in the world in history* (see Hofstede, 2005; Trompenaars, 2006). Thus, we should not be surprised that such values have overtaken the Church and have blinded us to certain biblical teachings.

Such individualism, however, is contrary to the book of Acts, in which most conversions reported were group conversions. In fact, out of the thirty instances of conversions recorded by Luke in Acts, all but three were families or groups. (The exceptions were Paul, the Ethiopian eunuch and Sergius Paulus). While individual conversions are also valid, the extreme shift from the exception to the norm should give us pause. Patzia notes, New Testament 'baptism was never regarded as an individual or private act because being united with Christ meant to be united with his body the church, and thus with every true believer' (Patzia, 241). Correspondingly, Gordon T. Smith warns us to not advance 'extreme individualism' which contributes to the loss of evangelical youth who never really connect with 'the language of revivalism' (Smith 2010, 15). Furthermore, such individualism runs contrary to the Spirit's work in Africa and Asia today where millions are coming to Christ *together*. Jerry Trousdale documents current movements in the contemporary African context and relates the importance of 'allowing time for group process' so that 'a whole group,

⁶ Gordon T. Smith in his book *Transforming Conversion* gives a very helpful list of twelve common evangelical teachings that have brought us to this point (Smith 2010, 15-25).

rather than just an individual or two, become disciples of Jesus and are baptized together' (Trousdale 2012, 40).

Since American Christianity and missiology are continually being exported throughout the world, we need to be very careful we do not slow the work of Christ by overlooking the importance of groups coming to Christ together and the necessity of joining a group (church) after conversion.

4. *The desire to go fast.* Another possible reason many have overlooked the New Testament model of baptism is a desire for quick results. In revivalism, the emphasis was on getting people to make decisions *now!* There was a great concern to be sure people were 'in' and 'saved' in case they died suddenly or the rapture occurred. But the resulting impact on discipleship has been disastrous, leading to millions of 'decisions' instead of millions of disciples. However, Jesus' command was to make *disciples* and to *baptize* these disciples (Mt 28:19). Out of concern to faithfully fulfill this command, the early church quickly moved to protracted periods of catechism *before baptism* in order to be sure people understood and practiced the essentials of the faith.

How can we sort out the tension between urging people to act immediately on the gospel (as in Acts) without ending up with lengthy periods of catechism? I believe a look at Acts will help.

While we have to be careful of taking Acts as normative for today, I do think the examples found there are instructive on two main points relative to baptism. First, in Acts most people were baptized *as groups* (as noted above). Second, baptisms happened *only after* there was significant background, experience or teaching. The various forms of *baptizo* occur eighty-one times in the New Testament, with twenty-two occurrences in Acts. These twenty-two occurrences of the word describe nine 'case studies' in Acts. These nine baptismal events from which we can study and learn, are as follows: (1) 2:38-41; (2) 8:12-16; (3) 8:36-38; (4) 9:18/22:16; (5) 10:47-11:16; (6) 16:15; (7) 16:33; (8) 18:8; (9) 19:3-5. By studying these nine events, we can see that all baptisms in Acts except for the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31-34) and perhaps the 'many Corinthians' (Acts 18:8) were either Jews (including proselytes and 'God-fearers') or Samaritans. This reveals that these people would have had *very significant background knowledge and experience* before making a commitment in baptism. They were not committing to a guru based on minimal knowledge; they were committing to Jesus of Nazareth as the long-awaited Messiah for their people, the one who fulfilled their Scriptures.

In the case of the Philippian jailer, though this was an 'immediate baptism' of a pagan apparently without much background, he also had much more than a short gospel presentation: he experienced the mighty miracle of an earthquake which also amazingly loosed the prisoner's chains (16:26); heard the overnight witness of the Apostle Paul and Silas through word and song (16:25; 31-32); and

witnessed the amazing character of these men who did not flee but concerned themselves with their captor's life (16:28). Furthermore, the jailer was not baptized alone, but along with his whole family (16:34). We have no other cases of Gentiles who had no background knowledge being immediately baptized in Acts except for possibly the case of the Corinthians in Acts 18.⁷

It is also important to note that in *every case* in Acts, whether with Jew or Gentile, individual or group, teaching preceded baptism. This teaching may have been through conversation and dialogue, and sometimes with accompanying miracles. But the idea that a modern, short 'gospel presentation' with an expectation for immediate belief and baptism is analogous to what happened with people in the book of Acts is simply untenable.⁸ The normal pattern in Acts was of preaching and teaching over some time leading to a (group) decision to believe and be baptized.

Today many thinkers from a broad spectrum are calling for a return to time for 'process' before baptism. Tim Keller writes about his ministry in New York City:

...coming to this point of uniting to Christ by faith often works as a process, not only as an event. It can occur through a series of small decisions or thoughts that bring a person closer and closer to the point of saving faith. In a post-Christendom setting, more often than not, this is the case. People simply do not have the necessary background knowledge to hear a gospel address and immediately understand who God is, what sin is, who Jesus is, and what repentance and faith are in a way that enables them to make an intelligent commitment.⁹ (Keller 2012, 281)

Keller advises that there should be 'a great deal of instruction leading up to any adult baptism' (ibid, 317) thereby 'combining the power of revivalist preaching and pastoring with ecclesial patterns of church life' (ibid, 318). Timothy Tennent, based on years of experience in India, writes:

⁷ Even if these Corinthians were predominantly pagans (the text does not specify) it seems clear they had been exposed to Paul's ministry and the influence of Crispus, the synagogue leader, over a period of weeks or months.

⁸ Some may argue that the Samaritans' background knowledge was so syncretistic that it should not be considered 'significant'. However, we must recall that Samaritans did at least know the following important things: the Torah and the Prophets, the Jewish customs (some of which they chose not to keep), the expectation of the coming Messiah (see John 4:25), the 'gossip' about John and Jesus. These facts put them in a very different situation than most adherents of major non-Christian world religions today.

⁹ I would suggest that this is even more the case in places that have never been Christian.

In my experience of working in India, I have found that discipleship often *precedes* conversion by many years. This seems counterintuitive in the West, because Christendom always assumed a larger Christian context, making it easy to live as a Christian, since Christian ethics and values were presumably infused throughout the whole of society. However, in India, it often takes many years for someone to comprehend the gospel message and what it means to follow Jesus Christ. Lengthy periods of instruction and modeling often take place long before someone receives Christian baptism. This is closer to Jesus' model exemplified in the Gospels, whereby intensive instruction took place with His disciples for several years before they fully understood and accepted His lordship. (Tennent 2010, 81)

Perhaps this glimpse into our evangelical background, presuppositions and biases will allow us to find the courage to reform baptism to be the life-changing salvation event God intended it to be.

Saving faith is expressed through baptism; we are not saved by a ritual

Having argued for a return to the ritual of baptism as the point where a person or group is ready to make a well-informed decision to follow Christ, we now turn our attention on the issue of why this idea is not tantamount to 'baptismal regeneration'. The solution to this problem is found in stressing our absolute commitment to the doctrine of salvation by faith alone: we are not saved by baptism but saved through faith in Christ (Eph 3:8-9 etc.). No amount of dunkings, washings, sprinklings or christenings can save us from our sins. We are saved through faith in Christ, by the grace of God. However, the purpose of this article is to call us back to the New Testament *manner* in which that initial commitment to Christ is made – not on a whim, nor silently, nor privately, but through baptism.

Thus, in baptism the Gospel proclamation and the hearing of faith become united in one indissoluble act, at one and the same time an act of grace and faith, an act of God and man. That is why in the New Testament faith and baptism are viewed as inseparables whenever the subject of Christian initiation is under discussion, so that if one is referred to, the other is presupposed, even if not mentioned. (Beasley-Murray 1962, 272)

Thus there is no conflict between faith and baptism. Baptism is simply an acted-out prayer and witness of commitment that the new believer 'prays' when she commits herself in faith to her Savior.

Suggestions for baptismal practice today

The following points are suggestions on ways to reform baptism today, in order to restore it to be the powerful symbol it was intended to be. These are offered as guidelines or ‘best practices’ to be followed when possible; not as ‘mandates’ that have to be performed no matter what.

1. Only baptize adults, or youth, who can demonstrate an adequate understanding of Jesus as Lord and his claims upon their lives, with an accompanying desire to submit to him. Children should be nurtured into the faith and offered baptism when they are fully cognizant of what it means to follow Christ and of the magnitude of that decision.

2. Cease calling people to ‘receive Christ by praying a prayer’. Rather give people time to process and prepare so that when they’re baptized, it’s a sincere and genuine commitment to Christ, as we see in the New Testament.

3. As much as possible, baptize people with their family and friends, as was the case in most baptisms recorded in Acts. This may require waiting for some members of the family to catch up with the group, but will allow for the power of the *oikos* (household) thus likely winning more people and keeping them in their cultural contexts.

4. Just prior to baptism, look at the biblical passages, stories and teachings on baptism with the new disciples so that they understand fully the symbolism of this ‘acted out prayer’, and why they are commanded by Jesus to undergo it.

5. Baptism should be always viewed by all as the point of commitment to Christ and to His body. Hence, it should not be administered lightly nor should it be unduly delayed. When a person or group demonstrates that they are ready to intelligently commit to becoming disciples of Christ, baptism would be given as soon as possible, accompanied by full membership in a local (hopefully culturally relevant) church. (Refer to the Appendix, ‘Overview of the Discovery Group Process Leading to Baptism’ as one modern-day way being used in CPMs around the world today to bring people and groups to intelligent decision.)

6. Since Jesus gives no command about who should baptize, and because inordinate delay upon serious commitment to Christ should be avoided, it seems best to have the person who has been discipling the new believer up to that point be the one who baptizes. Apparently this is how it happened in the New Testament, for we know some people who were not apostles were baptizing (for example, Philip in Acts 8:12 and 8:38; Ananias in 9:18) and we see that Paul was concerned to *not* do most of his baptizing himself (1 Cor 1:14-17).

Conclusion

In light of clear New Testament teaching and practice, I propose that we reform baptism. To be biblically accurate and make disciples (not just converts), reforming current evangelical views and practices of baptism is critical. For Jesus himself gave the command: 'Go therefore and make disciples, *baptizing* them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you' (Mat 28:19. Italics mine). May God give us the grace to obey.

Appendix to *Reforming Baptism*:

Overview of the Discovery Group Process Leading to Baptism

Today thousands of churches are being started and people are being discipled around the world by means of 'Discovery Groups' or 'Discovery Bible Studies' (Trousdale, 2012). The idea is to 'disciple into conversion' so that those being baptized have significant knowledge of God and Christ, as well as what it's like to follow him (John 7:17). Today there are over 100 Church Planting Movements happening around the world that have been catalyzed using this approach.

To start a Discovery Group, the outside evangelist begins to meet the Person of Peace (Luke 10:6 and parallels) in his family (or group) at least weekly, studying chronological Bible studies in the Person of Peace's home over a period of months. The studies are not teacher-led but inductive: the evangelist only asks questions and allows the group to discover God's truth for themselves directly from his Word. By following these simple steps each time, the group quickly learns the process and can reproduce it easily: (1) read the story; (2) retell the story several times; (3) ask what this story teaches about God; (4) ask what this story teaches about mankind; (5) ask what they think they should do in response to it, both individually and as a group; (6) ask who they could pass this story on to. When the group comes together the next time, they ask how it went with their applications and if they were able to share the story with anyone.

In certain contexts, this process may last up to thirty meetings in order to carefully lead groups from creation to Christ. In other contexts, the process only lasts for six meetings. The number of meetings and stories is determined by the need of the context. Each meeting takes approximately two hours allowing time for questions to be discussed and for each person to engage meaningfully with the text. Usually only one passage (or story) is used per meeting. If a group does not understand or apply the lesson(s) from the previous week, often the previous lesson is simply discussed again. Over the weeks as the study progresses, miracles sometimes occur and often significant lifestyle changes happen which confirm the Word. Usually if a group stays together through the process, most or all become believers together.

When the group comes to a climactic text such as John 3:1-21 or Matt 7:13-14 and decides they want to follow Christ, they are encouraged to come to Him through baptism.

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